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Meaningful Plots: Leisure, 'Rational Recreation' and the Politics of Gardening in British Allotments (Mid 19th -mid 20th Centuries)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- ¹ In 2009, when Queen Elizabeth II authorised the creation of a 4x10 metre vegetable patch in the garden at Buckingham Palace, this royal assent was seen as a symbol of the dramatic rise in popularity of the “grow your own” movement (“Queen turns corner...” 2009; “The Queen installs...” 2009). If many gardeners in Great Britain, like the Queen, have in recent years replaced some of their own flower beds with vegetables, the most visible achievement of this movement has been in the renewed popularity, after several decades of neglect and decline, of the allotment plot which is said to be going through a “renaissance” as illustrated by the nearly 100,000 people who are currently on the waiting-lists for one of the 300,000 plots available around Great Britain.¹ In addition to being the focus for this vogue for vegetable gardening, the allotment today is a site where many highly political questions seem to be springing up, in the more visible actions of “guerrilla gardening” and protests against evictions, which are linked with the question of the reclaiming of “urban commons”, or in the more ordinary and less visible operations of urbanites wanting to grow their own fresh, preferably organic, vegetables which is usually explicitly related to wider concerns about the relocalisation of food systems and the sustainability of future agriculture (McKay 2011).

- 2 If contemporary allotment gardening is frequently presented as a form of leisure that is saturated with important political issues, it seems, at first sight, to share very little with its 19th and early 20thc. ancestor. Until fairly recently, on the relatively rare occasions when historians paid attention to allotments, it was generally assumed that they were a simple form of charity and a way for rural landowners and middle-class industrialists and reformers to keep the discontent of agricultural labourers and the working class in check, by providing them with a tiny plot of their own to improve their lot, both materially and morally. The allotment was traditionally described as a way to goad the poor into adopting a form of "rational recreation", that emulated the practices of upper and middle-class gardening, while being adapted to their own needs, by offering a little supplement to their diet (Gaskell 1980; Constantine 1981: 390). Over the past few years, however, the subject has been the focus of more detailed attention in Great Britain and the allotment has become a more complex setting and the gardener a much less passive figure than used to be the case. If the basic features of allotment provision in England have not been completely revised, much closer attention has been paid to the details surrounding the uses of these plots. The present paper will mostly be concerned with analysing the current literature, and illustrating it with some original evidence, to show how early allotments are relevant and worthy of attention in the broader discussions on the culture and politics of leisure. It will first insist on the fact that the history of allotments should prompt us to question the narrative that describes the continuous progress of modernity as a straightforward evolution from subsistence-work to leisure and recreation. It will also attempt to show that the picture of charity and discipline described above must be complemented by one where the allotment could be a site of empowerment, one which provided gardeners with a sense of independence, community and agency.

Work or Leisure? Allotments as hybrid sites

- 3 In the 1980s, reflecting generally on the question of leisure, marxist historians John Clarke and Charles Crichton launched an attack on the optimistic celebration of the "Leisure Revolution", arguing that leisure could not be seen as merely the culmination of a continuous and abstract process in which market capitalism had progressively offered more and more freedom of choice and recreation opportunities (Clarke and Crichton 1985: 48-49). While they were interested in other leisure forms, Clarke and Crichton's critique may provide a useful starting point to discuss the question of allotments, which are often said to have become truly recreational places only in recent years.
- 4 After the heyday of the first half of the twentieth century, the allotment movement seems to have been marked by gradual decline, in part due to the rise of new leisure activities. In 1969, a Committee was set up to review policy on allotments in England and Wales, and argued that if allotments were becoming less and less popular in contrast with the fortunes of the movement in Denmark, Western Germany or Holland, it was precisely because they had failed to fully embrace the notion of "leisure" gardens (Ministry of Housing 1969: 1). The Committee led by Harry Thorpe, a professor of Geography at Birmingham, constructed a stark contrast between the old allotments and the new, purely recreational, forms of gardening. One of their main recommendations was indeed that the name "leisure gardens" be adopted in lieu of the

term “allotment”, which carried all the stigma associated with charity and subsistence (Ministry of Housing 1969: 354). The new forms of leisure gardens should serve mostly recreational purposes and would be marked by higher rents and new standards of beauty, accessibility and attractiveness (Ministry of Housing 1969: 32, 77, 174). According to this view, the history of allotments was characterized by a continuous and unilinear journey from subsistence and largely unchosen work to recreation and pleasure (in other words, a “leisure revolution”), one which still had not been completed by the early 1970s in Britain. One may thus wonder if nineteenth and twentieth-century allotments and the business of tending to the “potato ground” should be included in discussions of leisure activity, an area which appears fundamentally at odds with the notion of subsistence-work.

- 5 Let us first remark that if today's allotments are indeed rarely oriented towards the question of “pure” subsistence, it is probably very unlikely that any allotment gardener would not agree that whatever his or her main motivations, at the root of gardening still lie two rather indisputable facts : allotments do produce fresh food and they still often require strenuous physical work.² In other words, one can not entirely dismiss the question of food provision, nor can today's “leisurely” gardening be considered as being work-free, as if the two categories (work / leisure) belonged to distinct, sealed spheres. Similarly, with past allotments, one sees that these distinctions subsistence / pleasure and work / leisure were never entirely clear. On the one hand, allotments, especially in the nineteenth century, undoubtedly performed a real function of contributing to the subsistence of agricultural labourers, as yields per acre were usually very high and superior to those obtained by farming. Using a very wide range of sources, allotment historian Jeremy Burchardt has thus shown that rural allotments in the nineteenth century could contribute as much as 12 % to a family's income (Burchardt 2002: 4).³ On the other hand, the question of “leisure” was already central when allotments began to be provided on a wider scale in the 1840s. The Select Committee on the Labouring Poor, which in 1843 advocated the setting up of allotments, indeed insisted on the patches being rather small so that labourers would only tend them in their “leisure moments” and not neglect their wage labour.⁴ “Leisure” here of course meant only “non-work” (i. e. paid work) time, but this illustrates how the distinction between work and leisure is more complex than it seems, and how discussions of leisure should pay attention to the “fluidity of the boundaries between work and leisure” (Clarke and Crichton 1985: 52).
- 6 It is probable that it was precisely because of this hybrid nature and this undefined position on the work-leisure continuum, that allotment gardening figured much less prominently in most histories of working-class leisure than football, gambling or drinking. Allotments seem however worth investigating as hybrid ground because they transcend many traditional dichotomies such as material and non-material rewards or work and leisure, and undermine the simpler narrative of a continuous progress from unchosen work and drudgery towards leisure and recreation. If leisure was not invented in the late twentieth century, it may be interesting, then, to include the question of allotments in discussions of leisure as they provide a striking example of how an activity could, and still can, be considered both as work and as leisure. More importantly, the use of allotments was far from being merely oriented towards subsistence. The rise of allotments must indeed be seen in the wider context of a type of working-class gardening which was not directly useful, as may be seen in the development of flower growing and window gardening in the second half of the

nineteenth century and the attendant rise of local horticultural societies shows and contests (Wiles 2014: 23, 161; Burchardt 2002: 172). As recent work has shown, the distinction between the material and the non-material aspects of allotments is somehow artificial, even for earlier periods, and scholars have instead emphasised the multiplicity of their meanings and functions (aesthetic, medicinal, social) which contradict the simpler narrative according to which the subsistence-oriented allotment of the 19th century was replaced by the leisure garden of the 20th (Borsay 2006: 116; Willes 2014: 96).

Allotments and the “disciplining” of the poor

- 7 One wonders if the relative neglect, until recently, of allotment gardening in histories of working-class leisure could not also be explained by the fact that it was seen as less disorderly, rowdy or illegal than other leisure activities, and so maybe a little too “respectable”. Allotments were indeed developed partly in the first half of the 19th century as a response to social disorder, and were seen by rural landowners and middle-class reformers as a way to induce the poor to use their free time in a productive and “rational” way. From the early 19th century, with growing concerns that the erosion of common rights might become threatening to public order, enclosure Acts started to include the provision of allotments as a way of compensating the loss of common lands. Following the Swing Riots of 1830, allotments thus became increasingly favoured as a way of appeasing agricultural labourers, many schemes in Norfolk and Suffolk being for example initiated in the areas that were worst affected by rural disorder (Archer 1997: 23). As the scheme had the dual benefit of appeasing discontent while boosting their rental income, it was embraced by most landowners, and by 1840, there were already more than 100,000 plots across the country (Burchardt 2002: 69, 226). Allotments were increasingly endorsed by the various official committees appointed to find solutions to poverty such as the 1834 Poor Law Commission or the 1843 Select Committee on the Labouring Poor :

The allotment system also appears to be the natural remedy for one of the detrimental changes in the condition of the labouring classes of this country, which the lapse of years has wrought, by gradually shutting them out from all personal and direct interest in the produce of the soil, and throwing them for subsistence wholly and exclusively upon wages.⁵

- 8 In the 19th century, allotment gardening was thus mostly envisaged by its supporters as a way of mitigating social disruption and alleviating some of the evils and disorder brought about by the loss of common land. However, even then, the question of subsistence was never the main objective of allotments, and their provision had much more to do with giving the poor an occupation whose benefits were mostly of a moral nature. Allotments were regarded with increasing optimism by landowners and reformers alike as it was believed that they would teach the poor the values of self-reliance, industry, self-improvement, and it was argued that “the cultivation of a few vegetables and flowers (...)” would help “to keep a man at home and from the ale-house...”⁶ By the 1870s, it had become something of a commonplace to extol the virtues of gardening, which would teach labourers to become “more responsible, independent, and self reliant” (Archer 1997: 26-7). The number of plots therefore increased rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century, from around 250,000 plots in 1873 to nearly 500,000 by 1895 (Ministry of Housing and Local Government 1969: 14).

- 9 In the early years of the twentieth century, if allotments continued to figure prominently as instruments of social and moral reform, the locus and the target of the movement certainly shifted towards urban areas and the industrial working class. The rapid development of British cities in the nineteenth century had led to increasing fears that the disconnection of the urban working class from nature would lead to physical and moral degeneracy. This concern had initially led to the creation of public parks in all major cities, but by the end of the nineteenth century, allotments became increasingly favoured as a way to provide a leisure activity that could re-create some form of bond between the urban working-class and the soil (Mathis 2010: 86). Most of the early initiatives were thus led by philanthropic businessmen such as the Marshalls in Leeds or the Cadburys in Bournville (Nilsen 2014: 36). In the case of York, the famous manufacturing and philanthropic Rowntree family played a key role in the encouragement of gardening among their employees, which they conceived as a way to promote among them a form of rational and healthy recreation. The objective of the Rowntrees, who let allotments to their employees, was clearly to "improve" their moral character and to discourage drinking, betting or gambling, which were forbidden on allotment grounds (Wilson 2012: 736). The promotion of gardening by the Rowntrees led the leaders of the city of York to see allotments and gardens as the solution to the worst evils of modern urban life, as the Lady Mayoress of York argued at a meeting where the Rowntrees had just presented information on the progress of allotments in the city : "Much of the disease and discomfort due to overcrowded town life and lack of means of *rationaly spending leisure time* would disappear if people only had gardens and allotments" ("The allotment movement in York..." 1903: 10, my emphasis).
- 10 As Great Britain was marked in the early twentieth century by a rising feeling of anxiety about the nation's decline, gardening came to be seen not only as a cure for social disruption but also as a patriotic endeavour. As the focus of the allotment movement shifted towards the urban working class, the argument that gardening would maintain the physical health and vigour of the nation began to be voiced more powerfully than before, especially after the Second Boer War (1899-1902), which raised concerns about the poor physical condition of the working class. The Inter-departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration, which reported in 1904, indeed helped popularise the benefits for physical health of allotments, and praised the initiatives of the Rowntrees and the Cadburys (*Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration* 1904: 35, 87, 195). Allotments came to be viewed as a better solution to the problem of physical degeneracy than sport which was seen as rapidly succumbing to the "competitive spirit", leading football and other sports to be increasingly something to "watch" rather than to "play" ("The use and abuse of leisure" 1909: 4). The necessity for the nation to encourage gardening among all classes may for example be seen in the words of Lord Rosebery, former Liberal Primer Minister and one-time leader of the movement for National Efficiency, who argued in 1909 that providing more land to the working class would "promote a really valuable social reform" and be of "solid advantage to the community", by developing "mental discipline" and encouraging the re-creation of some link between the urban working class and nature ("Lord Rosebery on Gardening" 1909: 266-7). In the atmosphere of anxiety of the 1900s, the encouragement of gardening thus increasingly became a political imperative, and the 1908 Small Holding and Allotments Act required local councils to provide allotments to the labouring population⁷.

- 11 Unsurprisingly, during the two world wars, the patriotic nature of gardening became more and more obvious, and allotment provision developed extremely rapidly, as the quest for self-sufficiency made it essential to convert all unused land into food-producing sites. Requisitions of land made possible by the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914 led the number of plots to increase from 600,000 in 1913 to 1.5 million by the end of the conflict. Similarly, the Second World War was marked by a rapid increase in the number of plots, from around 750,000 to nearly 1.5 million by 1945 (Ministry of Housing and Local Government 1969: 14). Despite the reactivation of the primary function of allotments as sites for food production (also fundamental in the period of the Great Depression) rather than moral or physical regeneration, it could also be argued that such campaigns as the requisition of lands under the Defence of the Realm Act (WWI) or "Dig for Victory" (WWII) were as much about developing food self-sufficiency as they were about lifting the people's morale and encouraging a patriotic sentiment of cooperation (Ginn 2012: 296).
- 12 The common thread which runs through all the aspects of allotments we have seen so far is that the provision of gardening grounds seems, at first sight, to have been probably the most consensual way to organise the leisure hours of rural labourers and of the urban working class, one that would combine food production, with physical and moral health, while curbing social conflict and uniting an entire nation of gardeners in times of crisis. This led some historians in the 1970s to describe the promotion of allotments, not only as a form of outdated charity, but as an attempt by middle-class reformers to discipline forms of leisure and to replace disorderly forms of recreation with one whose main goal was the material, physical and moral "improvement" of the working class. As it became gradually associated with gardening rather than farming, this form of "leisure", contrary to the music-hall, fairs or the public house which distracted the worker from family and home, represented a way to civilise the poor, and "to control and discipline the working class in their use of leisure, and to encourage the pursuit of 'rational recreations'" (Constantine 1981: 390). In the words of another historian, by "keeping labourers out of the beer houses and off the poor rates", allotments and gardening in general could thus be seen as "the essential realisation of a utilitarian concept of the use of leisure time through rational recreation", which provided "a means of control over the moral and physical lives of the labouring population" (Martin 1980: 479-501). Allotments were thus described as a tool for the middle-class "to regulate, survey and control the living spaces and recreational activities of working-class subjects" by fostering the emulation of upper-class practices and ideals (Taylor 2008: 22; Martin 1980: 484). According to this vision, gardening as a leisure form was mostly an upper-class occupation which was gradually transmitted down the social ladder so that everybody could indulge in the "pleasures" offered by this aristocratic pursuit (Constantine 1981: 388). It could thus be argued that this critique was actually a variation, if approaching the question from a different point of view, of one of the tenets of the Thorpe Report, according to which the problem with allotments was that they had not gone far enough in emulating the practices and aesthetics of upper-class gardens, and had still not completely been purged of their utilitarian origins.⁸

Restoring the complexity of allotments

- 13 As Gareth Stedman Jones argued nearly 40 years ago, there is, however, a fundamental problem with an approach that focuses only on the moral coercion associated with the rationalisation of working-class leisure : “Far more attention has been paid to the ways in which entrepreneurs or the propertied classes attempted to change popular uses of leisure time than to the ways in which craftsman, artisan or working-class activists attempted to organise their non-work time” (Stedman Jones 1977: 162). The focus on the charitable or “disciplining” aspects of allotments stemmed mostly from the nature of the documents used, which involved a focus on legislation and on the arguments put forward by elite proponents of allotments, negating the experience of the gardeners themselves. The first rebuttal of this view of allotments occurred with the publication in the late 1980s of a seminal book by geographer David Crouch and anarchist theoretician Colin Ward, *The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture*, which contradicted the views expressed both in governmental reports or in more radical history, by elevating, on the contrary “the value of plots to empower, to enable (and) to provide a choice that frees from the marketplace” (Crouch and Ward 1997: xix). If the insights of Crouch and Ward were not immediately followed by empirical studies, one may detect, over the past 15 years, something akin to an “allotment renaissance” among historians as well, whose work has allowed us to see some of the complexity and diversity of the interests and motivations of the allotment movement.
- 14 This work has for example qualified the traditional picture according to which allotments first developed in rural areas after 1830 then spread to the cities in the twentieth century. As Margaret Willes has argued in *The Gardens of the British Working Class* (2014), the story of “leisure” gardening among the poor has a much longer history than historians have traditionally assumed and she begins her own narrative in the Tudor Period (Willes 2014: 2). As for urban allotments, most studies used to cite the exception of Birmingham, which boasted as many as 2000 “guinea gardens” in the 1830s, but it was generally agreed that allotments in the nineteenth century were a purely rural phenomenon and became an urban one only in the twentieth century (Willes 2014: 147). It seems, however, that here too the picture is more complex than this and that urban allotments were more widespread than previously assumed. One may cite the example of some East-End gardeners, in 1846, who used to garden on waste-land and were forced to abandon gardening because of the pressure exerted by rapid urbanisation, a process described by the *Horticultural Magazine*, which lamented the loss of “many small gardens [...] to give way to brick and mortar buildings (and factories)” (Willes 2014: 111). It has indeed been shown that urban allotments were more widespread than assumed, for example in Sheffield where there were 1200 gardens in the 1780s (Flavell 2003: 102). A recent study, using Geographic Information System, has thus studied the provision of allotments and detached gardens in ten cities (including Nottingham, Exeter, Ipswich, Lancaster and Newcastle) and has reached the conclusion that they “were a common feature in and around 18th century towns in England” (Thornes 2011: 110).
- 15 Another area for fruitful research, which can only be briefly hinted at in the remit of this article, is the gendered dimension of allotments. In 2006, a British newspaper ironically commented upon the recent feminization of allotments as an intrusion upon the last remaining preserve of the male, as if women had until now never set foot on

these plots, except perhaps during wartime ("It's curtains..." 2006; see also Borsay 2006: 113). It should be pointed out, however, that in the 19th century, given the long working hours of farm labourers, and as allotment rules usually forbade Sunday work, male workers could not perform all the tasks involved by themselves and those gardens were usually tended to by the entire family (Burchardt 2002: 170; Moselle 1995: 487). Some evidence also suggests that gardening remained, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, one of the only "leisure" forms that was shared by the whole family.⁹ For obvious reasons, the presence of women on allotments was also given a tremendous boost during the two world wars. If it has been argued that such campaigns as "Dig for Victory" and their invariably gendered stereotypes actually reinforced traditional roles, women being generally confined to menial tasks, we should be wary of assuming that the stereotypes outlined in those advertisements and campaigns necessarily reflected or reinforced gender roles in the gardens themselves (Ginn 2012: 301). More generally, despite the invisible nature of women's work in statistics (most female gardeners were registered under their husbands' names), it seems that many of them stayed on after the wars ended, and became respected as gardeners in their own right (Butcher 1918: 35).

"Can the gardener speak?"

- 16 In his 1957 book, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life*, Richard Hoggart singled out allotment gardening as the embodiment of the various forms of leisure where working-class men could "exercise personal choice, act freely and voluntarily" and become "specialists" (Hoggart 1957: 327). This theme seems to have picked up by most recent works devoted to the subject, leading to a reassessment of allotments as places that could empower rather than discipline. It has for example been suggested that allotments and gardening could foster the development of new vernacular forms of knowledge and skills, invisible in gardening magazines, but which undoubtedly contributed to an increased sense of individual agency. As the work experience provided by the allotment differed radically from that of the factory, it usually required creativity and autonomy, and contributed to a heightened sense of pride and self-respect (Crouch and Ward 1997: 26; Burchardt 2002: 167). Allotment gardening may have been "a middle-class solution to a working-class problem", but gardeners "adopted the scheme as their own" and set to the task in their own way (Scott 2005: ii). This may for example be seen in the case of the Dig for Victory Campaign (WWII), which is often viewed and reminisced upon as a rare case of the nation coming together and gardening as the ultimate form of patriotism. Franklin Ginn has shown, however, that if the campaign could be interpreted as an attempt by the government to "extend order into the domestic sphere", what is probably more significant is the failure of this attempt, governmental pamphlets and recommendations (over what to grow and how to tend to one's garden) being generally ignored by gardeners whose habits and motivations retained considerably more autonomy than the neat narrative of an army of patriot gardeners suggests (Ginn 2012: 297-8).
- 17 Allotments also enabled gardeners to create their own "natural spaces" in formerly derelict urban wasteland. In the 1980s, Crouch and Ward argued that allotments represented an "aesthetic challenge to the rules and conventions of urban planning and landscaping" and one recent book has developed the idea of allotment-gardening

as a “vernacular intervention on the landscape” to emphasize how gardeners participated in their own modest way to the creation of urban landscapes (Nilsen 2014: 147). These views are offered as a rebuttal to the common lament in the post-war period that many allotments had simply become “horticultural slums”, as Harry Thorpe described in the 1970s the sites where gardeners had built sheds and greenhouses, without any regard to standardization or, according to him, aesthetic considerations (Ministry of Housing and Local Government 1969: 178). If the main reason lying behind “the rickety-built sheds, the haphazardness of the rows, and the eclectic mix of plants” was usually less aesthetic than economic, the wider point is that this “intervention on the landscape”, was actually a source of frequent conflict and negotiation between authorities, associations and gardeners (Scott 2005: 100).

- 18 As sheds, fowl-houses and other buildings on allotments became more widespread in urban allotments, they indeed became a major bone of contention between gardeners and representatives of local authorities, who denounced the “squalor and untidiness which seems to be inevitable in allotment structures” (“Allotment notes” 1917: 3). In Hull, for example, the Corporation tried to mount an action in the early 1930s by making it compulsory to secure the permission of the Allotments Committee before any new shed could be erected (“Hull allotments” 1931: 6; “Hull allotment holders and their huts” 1931: 4). It was felt indeed that the “ramshackle huts” put up by allotment holders undermined the respectability of the movement, which had formed such an important basis at its beginnings. The issuing of strict regulations “with the sole idea of uniformity instead of the usefulness of the plots and the comfort of the plot-holders” was, however, deeply resented by the gardeners, many of whom, in the period of the Great Depression, could not afford the authorised hut in any case (“Huts on Hull allotments” 1934: 12; “Allotment grievances” 1934: 10). The regulations insisted on only new wood being used in the erection of these huts, which ran contrary to the traditional practice of picking up and reusing waste material. In addition to the question of cost, plot-holders objected to the proposed uniformity of the sheds, which according to them stifled the desires and designs of individuals. They also objected to the small size of the authorised sheds, which would undermine one of the key functions of allotments, i. e. “to be centres of social activity”. This led to long debates in the various local associations, and to the conclusion that the only way forward was to associate plot-holders in the decision-making process and the devising of workable regulations (“Hull Allotment Grievances” 1934: 16).

The allotment as fertile ground for politicization

- 19 It seems that if allotments were meant to increase the “respectability” of the working class, this did not necessarily entail the suppression of political and economic antagonisms and conflicts, quite the contrary. For example, if the relationship between Chartism and the allotment movement in the 1840s was at first sight somewhat strained (the latter was accused of depoliticising labourers), the two movements seem, upon closer historical investigation, to have converged much more than previously assumed. Analysing the allotment movement’s demand for more land, which coincided with the genesis of the Chartist Land Plan, Burchardt has shown that the question of allotments in several cases increased dissent and working-class demands, rather than appeased them and has thus argued that the two movements were in fact rather

compatible and cross-fertilising. A few years after this, allotments also participated in the transformation of militancy and helped foster the rise of agricultural trade-unionism in the 1870s, the provision of allotments indeed figuring prominently among the demands of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union. If these plots were mostly considered as a way for labourers to acquire some level of independence in a context of agricultural crisis and fear of unemployment, in some cases they also rendered agricultural strikes possible, by stimulating "horizontal solidarity" and providing for some modest form of self-sufficiency (Burchardt 2002: 210-13).

- 20 The most important aspect of the new work on allotments is indeed that these plots were a site for strengthening the independence of gardeners. This point is actually not new in any real sense and was developed for example in 1918 by the historian F. E. Green, who wrote about rural allotments in the following terms: "The allotment, indeed, becomes a base 'to fly to,' as labourers say, when times are hard and labour troubles have to be fought out. To the labourer, the allotment is the castle behind the walls of which he can bargain more manfully with his heavily armed foe — the farmer" (Green 1918: 91). In the nineteenth century, the idea of developing allotments for agricultural labourers was indeed not consensual and if landowners were generally favourably disposed towards the scheme, farmers were much more opposed to it : many were reluctant to give up land, but their opposition was mostly based on the fear that labourers would dilapidate all their strength, and, given the choice, would focus on their own plot rather than on wage labor. It was felt that allotments would not only undermine the labourers' dedication to work but would also weaken the farmers' "bargaining position vis-a-vis the labourers" by allowing the latter to be partly self-sufficient and autonomous (Burchardt 1997: 165-175).
- 21 It has also been argued that allotments provided for many workers the first "tangible political connection to government", especially in the twentieth century (Scott 2005: 111). The desire to acquire or preserve one's plot "fostered a better appreciation for political activism" and encouraged political participation at a local level. Allotments thus stimulated the formation of committees and societies by tenants, which played a role in the day-to-day organisation of the plots but which were also instrumental in petitioning landowners and, later on, local authorities, in order to have more land be made available. Once again, if the benefits of allotments and gardening had become commonplace and something of a cliché by the 1880s, the means by which to attain these and to improve the provision of allotments, were clearly not consensual, and led to prolonged debates on whether allotment provisioning should remain a voluntary endeavour or if some degree of coercion should be adopted (Onslow 1886).
- 22 It was the latter course that was eventually favored, and after the 1908 Small Holdings and Allotments Act, the provision of allotments came to be seen as a duty of the local authorities, which, it has been argued, altered the roles and duties of the Corporations as envisaged by the working-class residents (Wilson 2012: 733). In the case of York, for example, if the creation of allotments stemmed mostly from the initiative of businessmen and middle-class reformers, its consequences were actually quite unexpected. It led to the creation of collective organisations and actions in order to transform the initial terms, once most allotments were under the responsibility of the York corporation. Allotments fostered "working-class activism", and led to regular actions and debates with the aim of improving the lot of gardeners, on topics such as the provision of amenities, the right to keep poultry or pigs on the plots, and more

importantly, the questions of rent and security of tenure. As Ross Wilson writes, the provision of allotments “created a new set of relationships between citizens and the civic authority”, fostering an active political role for allotment-holders (Wilson 2012: 743).

- 23 Similarly, The Vacant Land Cultivation Society, first formed in the US, opened a branch in London in 1907 and petitioned local authorities to secure the provision of additional land for working-class gardeners. Far from being a consensual and painless task, this involved, according to one of the leaders of the VLCS, a constant fight against the “inaction” and “procrastination” of the London County Council (Butcher 1918: 19). Horticultural shows as well as allotment congresses were thus generally the occasion for voicing concern at evictions, the rise of rents and served to encourage allotment holders to fight at a local level to obtain security of tenure. The First World War was thus marked not only by an increasing number of patriot gardeners, but also by heightened levels of administrative and political activity since, for example, many allotment holders volunteered for the VLCS (“Congress of Allotment Workers” 1923: 8; Scott 2005: 53).
- 24 But even more important than the work and actions of the largest movements and associations, was the day-to-day work and political activities of local associations who bargained with the local authorities to obtain security of tenure and protested against evictions. From the end of the First World War, there were indeed countless episodes of eviction: the London County Council for example took the decision to evict 14,000 allotment holders in February 1919. In the interwar period, allotment holders throughout England became engaged in protests, conflicts and protracted negotiations on the question of access to land (“Derby Problem of Allotments” 1933; “Allotment Protest” 1934: 4; “Allotment Grievances” 1934: 10). Similarly, the picture of unanimity that is sometimes projected upon the “Dig for Victory” campaign should also be qualified as allotment holders organised quickly, as soon as 1943, in view of the end of the conflict to avoid being evicted as had been the case after the conclusion of the First World War. In Hull, for example, an Allotment Protection Association was formed in 1943, to contest the reallocation of allotments for other planning purposes, including, very often, areas for other leisure forms such as football fields or public parks (“Allotment for Playing Fields” 1932: 5; “Newland allotments” 1943: 1). If the post-war period was marked, until the 1970s, by a decline in the number of sites and gardeners, some allotment holders were not content with the explanation usually given (increased prosperity and the rise of new forms of leisure such as the television rendered the prospect of tilling the soil during one's leisure hour less and less attractive) and believed that they were also political reasons for the allotment's fall from grace. They thus targeted British local authorities who very often failed to provide sites with satisfactory amenities and security of tenure, and therefore continued to press for better gardening conditions and protection against evictions (Ministry of Housing and Local Government 1969: 31-3, 113).

Conclusion

- 25 It seems at first sight that there is very little in common between the nineteenth-century rural allotment holder tilling a potato patch and the current figure of the new city “leisure gardener”, enjoying his (or her) recreational plot while relating this to

political questions, such as appreciation of a different, more meaningful form of work, the relocalisation of food systems, the question of individual agency in urban design or the defence of the urban “commons”. This overview of the history of allotments until the 1950s, and the survey of the recent literature devoted to these plots, has however attempted show that work and leisure have not always been distinct, watertight categories. More importantly, if this leisure form used to be seen mostly as a rather depoliticised and consensual way of remediating all kinds of ills and conflicts, it may be that its effects were rather more complex and at times empowering than the simple picture of charity and discipline suggests. In other words, the 'earthly labour' of nineteenth and early twentieth century predecessors was also embedded in a complex web of meanings and political relations, and, as the author of a recent book on the subject has argued, these plots deserve our attention since “much more was at stake in these gardens than the provision of vegetables and a few flowers. Poor relief, access to land, social reform, public health, education, civic agency, and the political voice of the worker were all imbricated in the cultivation of these small garden plots” (Nilsen 2014: 1).

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NOTES

1. In fact, the waiting lists are probably due as much to the sharp decrease since the 1970s in the number of plots as to any sudden form of "renaissance".
2. The "subsistence" aspect of contemporary allotments should not, however, be completely discarded. See for example "Dig for recovery: allotments boom as thousands go to ground in recession", *The Guardian*, 19 February 2009.
3. For a complete list of the sources and access to Burchardt's database, see Burchardt and Cooper (2010) and the accompanying CD-ROM.
4. *Report from the Select Committee on the Labouring Poor (Allotments of Land)* (1843: iv) quoted in Hasbach (1908: 240).

5. *Report from the Select Committee on the labouring poor (allotments of land)*, p. v, quoted in Moselle (1995: 483).
 6. "The Allotment system", *The Penny Magazine*, vol. 14 (1845: 88), quoted in Ministry of Housing and Local Government (1969: 10). My emphasis.
 7. "If the council of any borough, urban district or parish are of opinion that there is a demand for allotments (for the labouring population) in the borough, urban district or parish (and that such allotments cannot be obtained at a reasonable rent and on reasonable conditions by voluntary arrangement between the owners of land suitable suitable for such allotments and the applicants for the same) the council shall provide a sufficient number of allotments and let such allotments to persons (belonging to the labouring population) resident in the borough, district, or parish and desiring to take the same". "The Small Holdings and Allotments Act, 1908" in Mitchell (1924: 60).
 8. This point was developed by Crouch and Ward (1997: 9).
 9. This is suggested by many interviews of British people recalling their childhood in the Edwardian period in the oral history project by Thompson and Lummis (2009). See in particular interviews n° 143, 378, 383, 428, 449 and 433.
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ABSTRACTS

If allotment gardening remained until recently a relatively under-researched aspect of leisure history, it has become, in the last few years, the object of considerably more detailed attention. The present paper attempts to present a synthesis of this work which has considerably enriched our understanding of this form of leisure. Not only does the history of allotment gardening in Great Britain challenge traditional dichotomies between work and leisure, but it also shows how gardening was embedded in a complex web of meanings and political relations. While allotments used to be described as a rather depoliticised and consensual form of recreation, recent historical work indeed shows that its effects were rather more complex and at times empowering than was assumed.

Si le jardinage communautaire est resté jusqu'à récemment un aspect relativement peu étudié de l'histoire des loisirs, il est devenu, ces dernières années, l'objet d'une analyse beaucoup plus détaillée. Le propos du présent article est de présenter une synthèse de ce travail qui a considérablement enrichi notre compréhension de cette forme de loisirs. Non seulement l'histoire des jardins communautaire en Grande-Bretagne remet en question les dichotomies traditionnelles entre le travail et les loisirs, mais elle montre aussi comment le jardinage était ancré dans un réseau complexe de significations et de relations politiques. Alors que les jardins communautaires étaient autrefois décrits comme une forme de récréation plutôt dépolitisée et consensuelle, les récents travaux historiques montrent en effet que leurs effets étaient plutôt plus complexes et parfois habilitants qu'on ne le pensait.

INDEX

Mots-clés: jardinage, Royaume-Uni, loisirs, jardins communautaires

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